

Public Statement

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Algeria: Relatives of the "disappeared" violently dispersed

On 8 November 2001 some 100 relatives of the "disappeared" were violently dispersed by the security forces as they gathered to demonstrate in the eastern Algerian city of Constantine. Four women were beaten with batons, while others were insulted and threatened.

During the last month in Constantine, members of the security forces have, on several occasions, prevented families of the "disappeared" from holding peaceful protests to call on the Algerian authorities to shed light on the fate of their loved ones. The incidents appear to indicate an escalation in attempts to intimidate the relatives.

Amnesty International is concerned about the incident and urges the Algerian authorities to ensure that families of the "disappeared" are allowed to exercise their right to peaceful demonstration. In particular, the authorities should take the necessary steps to guarantee that the security forces do not ill-treat, threaten or intimidate families of the "disappeared."

Between 9:30am and 10am yesterday some 100 relatives of the "disappeared" began gathering in front of the office of the *wali* (governor) of Constantine, the head of the regional administration, to hold a demonstration that they have been organizing each Thursday for over a year. As they did so, the relatives, who consist in the main of mothers of the "disappeared," found that several dozen uniformed members of the security forces were already stationed outside the office.

Security force personnel ordered the families to leave the area, before dispersing them by force. Four women relatives of the "disappeared" were beaten with batons. Others were insulted and threatened with reprisals should they continue to demonstrate about their "disappeared" relatives.

One wife of a "disappeared" man, Naima Saker, was physically dragged out of a telephone booth as she tried to alert others to the situation. Her husband, Salah Saker, "disappeared" after being arrested by the police at his home in Constantine in May 1994. The family managed to procure a copy of a police statement confirming that the police of Constantine had arrested Salah Saker and transferred him to a regional military investigation centre. However, they have been unable to this day to obtain any information about his fate and whereabouts. No judicial proceedings into the case have ever been opened, despite all the evidence available.

Background

Since 1993, particularly between the years 1993 and 1998, around 4,000 men and women have "disappeared" in Algeria after being arrested by the security forces. Their families have been searching for information on their whereabouts ever since. They have gone to police stations, army barracks, prisons, morgues and cemeteries, petitioned the judicial authorities and appealed to the government, the parliament and the President of the Republic. Despite repeated government promises to carry out investigations into "disappearances," not one individual case has been fully and independently investigated.

For years most families of the "disappeared" were too afraid to protest publicly. From August 1998, however, hundreds of relatives, especially mothers, began to regularly hold demonstrations in the capital, Algiers, and other cities demanding news of their missing loved ones. Even though the protests have generally been allowed to take place, on a number of occasions in the last three years the security forces have broken up demonstrations by force and beaten, ill-treated and/or arrested the relatives.

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